

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
A PAINFUL OPERATION

NEXT day, at a private meeting of the Gremyachy party nucleus it was unanimously decided to socialise all the animals, whether large or small, belonging to the members of the Gremyachy "Stalin" collective farm. It was also decided to socialise the fowls, in addition to the livestock.

At first Davidov stood out stubbornly against socialising the smaller animals and the fowls, but Nagulnov resolutely declared that if such a decision were not passed at the next collective farm meeting the spring sowing campaign would be wrecked, for all the animals would be slaughtered and the fowls into the bargain. Razmiotnov supported him, and after some vacillation Davidov agreed.

In addition, it was decided and recorded in the minutes that an extensive propaganda campaign must be put in hand to bring to an end all wilful slaughtering, for which purpose each member of the party voluntarily undertook to visit every hut that same day. As for legal measures against those caught slaughtering livestock, it was decided not to proceed against anyone for the time being, but to await the results of the propaganda campaign.

"The cattle and fowls will be safer this way. Otherwise there won't be a cow's low or a cock's crow to be heard in the village by the spring," Nagulnov said in delight, as he slipped the minutes of the meeting into a folder.

The collective farm general meeting willingly passed the resolution socialising all the animals, for the draught animals and dairy cows had already been so treated, and the decision affected only the young cattle, sheep and pigs. But long and heated discussions arose over the proposal to include the fowls. The women particularly objected. But at last their obstinacy was overcome. Nagulnov was largely responsible for this. He it was who, pressing his long palms against the medal on his breast, said feelingly:

"Women, my dear women! Don't hanker after your chickens and geese. You didn't hold us back before, and you mustn't hold us back now. Let the fowls live in the collective farm. By the spring we'll have subscribed for an incubator, and instead of handfuls it'll turn out chicks for us by the hundred. An incubator's a machine which hatches chicks marvellously. Please don't stick to your point. They'll still be your chickens, only they'll be in the communal yard. There ought not to be any private ownership in hens, my dears. And besides, what use are the chickens to you? They won't lay eggs at present in any case. And look at all the bother you'll have with them before spring comes. They'll be jumping into the garden and pecking up the seedlings, and the next moment you'll find the devils have hidden their eggs away somewhere under the granary, or a pole-cat is twisting the neck of one of them. There's no end to the accidents that happen to them, and you've got to be always crawling into the chicken-house, to feel which has got an egg and which is barren. You crawl in and you pick up the chickens' lice, or some disease. They're nothing but a worry and misery to you. But how will they live when they're in the collective farm? It'll be splendid! They'll be properly looked after; we'll put

some old widower, like Akim Beskhlebnov for instance, in charge of them, and let him feel them the whole long day, and crawl on to the perches. He'll find it a pleasant and easy job, just suited to an old man. He'll never rupture himself doing that in all his born days! Let's come to agreement, my dears!"

The women laughed, sighed a little, talked it over among themselves, and came to agreement.

Immediately the meeting was over Nagulnov and Davidov set off to visit the huts. From the results of their inquiries in the first few huts it became evident that there was meat in every one. Just before dinner-time they looked in on old Shchukar.

"He's an active supporter of the farm, and he said himself that the young cattle ought to be spared. He won't have slaughtered any of his stock," Nagulnov assured Davidov as they went into Shchukar's yard.

They found the "active supporter" lying on the bed with his legs drawn up. His shirt was rolled back as far as his tangled little beard, and the sharp rim of an earthenware pot of some six litres capacity was pressing into his pale, emaciated belly overgrown with shaggy of grey hair. Two cupping glasses were sticking like leeches to his sides. He did not look up as the newcomers entered. His hands were trembling, and were crossed on his chest as though he were dead; his eyes were staring out of their sockets, and, delirious with pain, were slowly rolling in their orbits. Nagulnov thought he noticed a cadaverous smell in the hut. Shchukar's corpulent wife was standing by the stove, and Mamichikha the simple woman, an agile and mousey-grey old hag, was bustling around the bed. Mamichikha was well known throughout the district for her skill in applying cupping glasses, piling on iron pots, bonesetting, letting and stanching blood, and performing

abortions with a knitting needle. And she it was who at this moment was "doctoring" the thrice unhappy Shchukar.

Davidov's eyes almost started out of his head as he entered. "Good morning, old man!" he said. "What's that you've got on your belly?"

"I'm in terrible pain! With my stomach!" the old man said with difficulty, making two bites of the sentence. And at once in a thin voice, he squealed like a puppy and screamed: "Take the pot off! Take it off, you old witch! Oh, my stomach's bursting!"

"Hold on, hold on! It'll be easier in a minute," the old woman argued with him in a whisper, vainly trying to pull away the rim of the pot, which with the suction had sunk deeply into the skin.

But old Shchukar suddenly roared like a wild beast, lunged out at the woman with his foot, and seized the pot with both hands. Davidov hastened to his help; snatching up the wooden rolling pin from the top of the stove, he pushed the old woman away, and struck with the rolling pin at the bottom of the pot. The vessel smashed to pieces, and the air rushed from the shards with a whistle. Old Shchukar gave one hiccough from the very depths of his body, and, panting heavily, heaving a sigh of relief, easily tore away the cupping glasses. Davidov glanced at the old man's belly with its enormous blue-black navel sticking up among the fragments of earthenware, and fell back on to the bench, choking with a furious spasm of laughter. The tears rolled down his cheeks, his cap fell off, and the strands of black hair hung into his eyes.

A tenacious hold on life had old Shchukar! Hardly had Mamichikha begun to lament over the broken pot when he dropped his shirt over his bare body and got up.

"Oh, you old ruffian!" the woman screamed between her sobs. "The devil's broken my vessel! I heal men like you, and you're never grateful!"

"Get outside, woman! Get outside at once!" Shchukar pointed to the door. "You all but killed me that time. You ought to have had your pot broken over your head. Clear out, or it may come to murder. I'm a desperate man when I'm roused."

"What was all this about?" Nagulnov asked almost before Mamichikha had closed the door behind her.

"Oh, my sons, kind friends, believe me! I was all but gone that time. For two whole days I didn't set foot outside my yard, and I went about keeping my trousers up with my hands. My bowels were so loose I couldn't hold myself! I'm afraid I've gone thin, it came away as if I'd been a mangy gosling."

"Have you been cramming yourself with meat?"

"Meat. . . ."

"Have you killed your calf?"

"The calf's gone. . . . It didn't do me any good. . . ."

Makar coughed, hatefully looked the old man up and down, and hissed:

"You old devil, what you ought to have had was not an earthenware pot but a six-gallon drum on your belly. So that it would have sucked you all in right down to your intestines! Wait till we kick you out of the collective farm, then you won't be able to hold yourself even so much! What did you kill your calf for?"

"I was drawn into sin, Makar dear! The old woman talked me into it, and you know the cuckoo that calls at night always calls the loudest. Have pity. . . . Comrade Davidov! You and I have been good friends, you won't turn me out of the collective farm, will you? I've already suffered enough for my sins. . . ."

"Well, what are you to do with him?" Nagulnov waved his hand. "Come on, Davidov! You old bag of sickness, you mix some gun grease with salt and drink that up, it'll do you good."

Shchukar's lips quivered with umbrage. "Are you poking fun at me?" he asked.

"It's the truth I'm telling you. In the old army we used to get rid of the belly-ache that way."

"What, do you think I'm made of iron? Am I to use what they clean a lifeless gun with? I won't! I'd rather die among the sunflowers, but I won't take grease!"

The very next day, having failed to die, Shchukar was hobbling around the village, telling everyone he met how Davidov and Nagulnov had visited him, and had asked his advice concerning the repair of implements for the spring sowing, and other collective farm matters. At the end of his story the old man made a long pause, then, removing his cigarette, he sighed:

"I wasn't well, and so they came to see me. They can't get things to go right without me. They suggested some medicine for me to take. 'Get well, old man,' they said, 'or, God forbid, you'll die, and we shall be lost without you.' And they would be, true Christ! The least thing they call me to the nucleus to take a look at something, and to give them advice. I'm not a big talker, but I speak to the point. My words won't be lost on them, I hope!" And he raised his faded, exulting eyes to his hearer, trying to discover what impression he had made.

Bitterly offended, Shchukar silently took the order, and went out without a word of parting. But after he had received an ample tanned sheepskin from Yakov Lukich he recovered his good-humour. His little eyes contentedly narrowed and lit up exultingly. As though taking a pinch of salt he took the edge of the sheepskin in his finger and thumb, raising it on one side as though it were the skirt of a woman about to cross a puddle, clicked his tongue, and boasted before all the cossacks:

"There's a fine sheepskin for you! With my own back I earned it. Everybody knows that when we turned Titok out he attacked comrade Davidov with a bolt. 'My friend's done for,' I thought. And in a moment I flung myself like a hero to save him, and beat Titok off. If it hadn't been for me Davidov would have been in his coffin."

"But they say you ran away from a dog and fell over, and it began to tear at your ears as if you were a swine!" one of his audience insisted.

"That's all lies. What the people have come to; they'd twist anything. What's a dog? A dog's a stupid and filthy animal. It doesn't understand a syllable." And old Shchukar cleverly turned the conversation into other channels.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TROUBLES OF THE FARM

NIGHT. . . .

Northward from Gremyachy Log, far, far beyond the rolling, shadowy steppe uplands, beyond the ravines and valleys, beyond the solid masses of forest, stands the capital of the Soviet Union. Above it lies a flood of electric lights. Like the reflection of a noiseless fire, their flickering azure gleam rises above the many-storied houses, eclipsing the unneeded light of the midnight moon and stars.

Fifteen hundred kilometres distant from Gremyachy Log, stone-bound Moscow also has its night life. The locomotive syrens shriek challengingly, the car horns sound like the notes of an enormous accordeon, the trams clank, squeak and grind. But behind the Lenin Mausoleum, behind the wall of the Kremlin, in the icy, whirling wind, the red flag flutters in the irradiated sky. Lit up from below by the white incandescence of electric light, it burns and streams like spurting crimson blood. The wind eddies like a whirlpool and momentarily winds up the heavily hanging flag, then it is unwound again, its end streaming now to the west, now to the east, flaming with the lurid fire of insurrection, calling to the struggle.

One night two years before, Kondrat Maidannikov, who was in Moscow attending the All-Russian Congress

on the grain, both ours and others', and the grain is burnt up by the bitter tears, and a great famine and plague goes over the world. So the poor mustn't cry out at all now, for they only hurt themselves. . . . Do you understand, little one?" And she ended sternly: "Pray to God, Kondrat! Your prayers will reach Him quicker."

"But are we poor, mummy? Is daddy poor?" little Kondrat had asked his pious mother.

"Yes, we're poor," she had answered.

Falling on his knees before the dark ikon of the Old Believers, Kondrat had prayed and wiped his tears dry, in order that an angry God should not see them.

Kondrat lay untangling the past as though it were a fishing net. He was the son of a Don Cossack, and now he was a collective farmer. He thought a great deal during those first nights of the collective farm existence, which were as many and long as the steppe tracks. When his father had been serving as a conscript, his company had knouted and sabred the striking weavers of Ivanovo-Voznesensk, and had defended the millowners' interests. His father died, Kondrat grew up, and in 1920 he had cut down the Polish Whites and Wrangel's soldiers, defending his Soviet government, the government of those same Voznesensk workers, from the attacks of the millowners and their hirelings.

Kondrat had long since ceased to believe in God, and now he believed in the Communist party which was leading the toilers of all the world towards freedom, towards the sunlit future. He took all his cattle to the collective farmyard, carried along all his fowls down to the last feather. He was in favour of only those who worked being allowed to eat and walk the earth. He was firmly and inseparably grafted into the Soviet regime.

Yet he could not sleep at night. And he could not sleep because he still felt a cankerous yearning for his property, for the goods which he had himself voluntarily renounced. The cankerous regret grew in his heart, chilling it with yearning and boredom.

Formerly he had been occupied from dawn to dusk; in the morning he would feed the bullocks, cows, sheep and horses, and take them down to drink; at noontide he would once more scrape up hay and straw out of the threshing floor, afraid of losing a single stalk. And later he had to tidy up again for the night. Even during the night he would go out several times into the cattle-yard to see that all was well, and to gather back into the mangers the hay trodden underfoot. His heart rejoiced in his farmer's anxieties. But now his yard was empty and dead. There was nothing to go out to attend to. The mangers stood empty, the wattle-gates stood wide open, and not even a cock-crow was to be heard all through the long night. There was nothing by which to tell the time and the passing of the hours of darkness.

He got rid of his boredom only when his turn came to look after the collective farm stables. In the daytime he would get away from his hut at the first opportunity, in order to avoid the sight of the terribly deserted yard, to avoid his wife's afflicted, reproachful eyes.

Now she was sleeping at his side, breathing regularly. On the stove their little daughter Khristishka was tossing, sweetly smacking her lips, and muttering in her sleep: "Daddy, gently . . . gently. . . ." In her sleep she was seeing her own bright, childish dreams; she lived easily, breathed easily. She could be delighted with an empty matchbox, and turn it into a sledge for her rag doll. She could play with the sledge all day, and the

following day would bring her the smile of a new amusement.

But Kondrat had his own thoughts. He struggled in them like a fish in a net. "When will you leave me, accursed yearning? When will you dry up, you dangerous devil? But what's it all for? I pass by the stalls, and other men's horses are standing there and they mean nothing to me. But when I reach my own horse, and glance at its clipped left ear, and its back with the black strap running right to its tail, I begin to choke, and then he seems dearer than my own wife. And I still try to give him sweeter, finer grass. And others are just the same: each pines after his own horse, and doesn't care a fig for the others. Yet there aren't any 'others' now, they're all ours. But there it is. . . . They don't want to look after the property, many of them aren't used to it. Kuzhenkov was on duty yesterday; he didn't take the horses out to drink, but sent a lad with them. The boy mounted one horse bareback, and drove the whole lot down to the river at a gallop. Whether they'd all drunk or not, he rounded them up and galloped them back to the stables. And you can't speak to anybody about it, for they simply bare their teeth and say: 'Ha, you want more than all the rest of us.' And it's all come of the struggle we've had to get property. I expect those who've always had their fill don't mind so much. I mustn't forget to tell Davidov to-morrow how Kuzhenkov watered the horses. If they're looked after like that they won't be able to shift a harrow when the spring comes. And to-morrow I must go and see how they're caring for the fowls; the women say that seven have died already through being overcrowded. Oh, it's difficult! And why did they have to collect all the fowls at once? They might have left a cock in each

yard to serve instead of a clock. There's nothing in the co-operative shop, and Khristishka's going about barefoot. You can do what you like, but she must have a pair of shoes at least. My conscience won't let me ask Davidov for a pair. Oh, well, let her spend this winter on the stove, and by the summer she won't need them."

Kondrat thought of the want which the country was suffering in carrying through the Five Year Plan, and he clenched his fists under the sacking, hatefully waging a mental argument with the workers in the west who were not Communists. "You've sold us for good wages from your masters! You've betrayed us, brothers, to have your bellies well filled. Why haven't you got a Soviet government? Why are you so late? If you'd had a rotten life of it you'd have made your revolution by now; but it's clear the fiery cock hasn't pecked at your arses yet. You've got no guts, you can't get a move on no-how, and you're slow, you're all wobbly and uncertain. But it will peck at you! It'll peck you into sores! Can't you see across the frontiers how hard it is for us to build up our economic life? What want we're suffering, how we go half-naked and half-barefoot, but how we grit our teeth and work? You'll be ashamed to come in when everything's done, brothers! I'd like to have a great post made so as you could all see it; I'd climb to the top of it, and then I'd lay my tongue about you!"

He dropped off to sleep. The cigarette slipped out of his mouth and burnt a great black hole in his only shirt. The smart of the burn awoke him, and he got up, cursing under his breath, and fumbled in the dark for a needle in order to sew up the hole. Otherwise Anna would see it in the morning and would nag away at him for a couple of hours. But he could not find a needle.

He fell asleep again.

He awoke at dawn, and went into the yard to relieve himself. As he went he suddenly heard an extraordinary din. Shut in one shed for the night, the socialised cocks were all bawling at once in a myriad-voiced and mighty choir. Opening wide his swollen eyelids in his astonishment, Kondrat listened for a couple of minutes to the massed, incessant crowing, and when the last belated "cuck-curroo" had died away he sleepily smiled. "How they're bawling, the devils!" he thought. "Just like a brass band. Anyone living near them will have no sleep or quietness. And in the old days one would start at one end of the village, and another at the other, without order or harmony. Ah, life!" and he went to do his duties.

After breakfast he went along to the fowl-yard. Old Akim Beskhlebnov greeted him with an angry shout:

"Well, what are you wandering around so early in the morning for?"

"I've come to visit you and the fowls. How are you getting on, daddy?"

"I used to live, but now. . . . God preserve me!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Looking after the fowls is slowly killing me."

"How?"

"You come and spend a day here, and you'll soon find out! The devilish cocks fight the whole long day, I've got tired out through running after them. You'd say hens were of the female sex, but these seize one another by the crest and they're all over the yard. This sort of service can go to hell for all I care. I'm going this very day to Davidov to ask him to let me mind the bees."

"They'll get used to it, daddy."

"While they're getting used to it daddy will be turning up his toes! And anyway, is it a man's job? Whatever I may look like, I'm a cossack, I took part in the Turkish campaign. But here I'll have you know that I've been made commander-in-chief of the chickens! It's two days since I took up my duties, but there's no getting away from the brats. As I go home they shout after me: 'Daddy hen-feeler,' 'Daddy Akim hen-feeler.' Have I had everybody's respect only to die in my old age with the nickname of 'Hen-feeler'? That's not what I want."

"Drop it, daddy Akim. Why worry about the brats?"

"If it was only the kids who make game of me! But some of the women join in with them. As I was going home to dinner yesterday Nastia Donietskova was standing drawing water from the well. 'Are you managing the chickens all right, daddy?' she asked. 'Yes, I'm managing,' I said. 'And are any of the hens laying, daddy?' 'Some are laying,' I said, 'but not too well.' And how she snorted, the Kalmik mare! 'See that there's a basket of eggs laid by ploughing time,' she said, 'or we'll make you ride the hens yourself.' I'm too old to listen to such jokes. And the job's too unpleasant."

The old man was going to say something more, but two cocks began to fight breast to breast by the fence, the blood started to stream from the comb of one of them, a handful of feathers flew from the other's crop. Old Akim rushed towards them at a run, arming himself with a switch as he went.

Despite the early hour, the collective farm office was crowded with people. By the porch a pair of horses harnessed to a sledge stood waiting for Davidov, who was

getting ready to drive to the district town. Lapshinov's saddled trotting-horse was pawing the snow, while Liubishkin busily tightened the girths. He was getting ready to ride to Tubyanskoe, where he was to have a talk with the local collective farm manager concerning a grain-sorter.

Kondrat went into the first room. A book-keeper recently arrived from the town was rummaging through his books. Yakov Lukich, grown hollow-cheeked and gloomy during the past few days, was sitting writing opposite him. In the same room were crowded the collective farm workers whom the foreman had assigned to cart hay. In one corner Arkady and pockmarked Agafon Dubtsiev, the leader of the third brigade, were arguing with Ippolit Shaly, the only smith in the village. Razmiotnov's sharp and jovial voice came from the farther room. He had only just arrived, all bustle and laughter, and was telling Davidov:

"Four old women came to see me very early this morning. Old Uliana, Mishka Ignationok's mother, was their ringleader. Do you know her? No? She's getting on in years, weighs a good seven poods, and has a wart on her nose. Well, they came along, and mother Uliana stormed and stormed. I couldn't understand what she was saying, she was so angry and the wart on her nose began to go purple. And she attacked me like a fury: 'Ah, you . . .' and all the rest of it. I had a crowd of people with me in the Soviet, and there she was cursing and swearing. Of course I sternly told her: 'Shut your mouth and stop using such expressions, or I'll send you to the district for insulting the government.' Then I asked her: 'What are you in such a rage about?' And she answered: 'What are you trying to take a rise out of old women for? How can you poke fun at our old

age?' It took me all my time to find out what was the matter. At last it appeared that they'd heard that in the spring the collective farm management committee was to set apart all the old women who couldn't work, those who were gone sixty, to . . ." Andrei almost choked in the attempt to control his laughter. ". . . it appeared that owing to the shortage of steam machinery for hatching eggs the old women were to be given that little job! They were raving mad about it. Old mother Uliana bawled as though she was being killed: 'You son of a bitch! Sit me on eggs, would you? There isn't an egg I'd sit on! I'll give you all a good hiding with my frying pan, and then I'll drown myself.' I out-shouted the lot of them: 'Don't drown yourself, mother Uliana; in any case our river hasn't got enough water in it to drown you. It's all lies, all kulak yarns.' But what a trick, comrade Davidov! Our enemies are spreading lies like that in order to stop our work. I began to question them to find out where the story had come from, and learned that a nun had come from Voiskovoi the day before yesterday, had spent the night at Timofei Borshchev's hut, and told them the chickens were being collectivised in order to be sent into the towns to make soup. And she said that little chairs of a special sort, with straw in the bottoms, were to be made for the old women, and they would be forced to hatch out the eggs, and those who refused would be tied on to the chairs!"

"Where is this nun?" Nagulnov, who had been listening vigorously, asked.

"She's hopped it. She's no fool! Told her lies and then cleared off."

"Black-tailed magpies like her ought to be arrested and sent where they belong to. Good job I didn't get

hold of her. I'd have tied her skirt above her head and laid on the knout. But you're chairman of the Soviet, and anybody who likes can spend the night in your village. That's a fine state of things!"

"Damn it, I can't keep a watch on everybody!"

Wearing a huge sheepskin over his greatcoat, Davidov sat at the table taking a last glance at the plan for spring field work confirmed by the collective farm meeting. Without raising his eyes, he said:

"Slandering us is an old trick of the enemy. He's a parasite, and he wants to mess up all our constructive work. And sometimes we play right into his hands, as we have over the fowls. . . ."

"What about the fowls?" Nagulnov dilated his nostrils.

"By standing out for socialising the fowls."

"That's not true."

"It is true! It's a fact. We oughtn't to have worried about the small change. Here we haven't got our sowing materials ready yet, and we took on the fowls! Sheer idiocy! I could kick myself now. And the district committee will lay it on about the seed grain fund when I get there. Fact! But a very unpleasant fact. . . ."

"Tell me why the fowls oughtn't to have been socialised. The meeting agreed, didn't it?"

"It isn't a question of the meeting," Davidov frowned. "Why can't you understand that the fowls are a detail, and we ought to decide the main point: to strengthen the collective farm, raise the membership percentage to a hundred, and finally sow the corn. And I seriously suggest that we've gone politically wrong in regard to the damned fowls. Fact, we've gone wrong! Last night I was reading something dealing with the organisation of collective farms, and I realised where we'd gone wrong."

You see, we've got a collective farm, and that's a co-operative association. But we've been trying to turn it into a commune. Isn't that right? And that's a left-wing deviation. Fact! You think it over. If I were in your place (you proposed it and got round us to accept it) I'd admit the mistake with Bolshevik courage, and would give the order for the chickens and other fowls to be redistributed to their farms. And if you won't do it, I'll do it off my own bat as soon as I get back. Well, I'm off. Good-bye."

He clapped on his cap, turned up the high collar of his kulak sheepskin, which stank of naphthalene, and said as he fastened his document case:

"There are plenty of nuns still walking about alive and telling yarns about us, trying to get the women and the old men against us. But the collective farm job is so young and so terribly necessary. Everybody ought to be on our side. The old women, and the other women, too. The women also have their part to play in the collective farm. Fact!" He went out with long and heavy strides.

"Come on, Makar, send the chickens back to their homes. Davidov's said the truth." As he waited, expecting an answer, Razmiotnov gave Nagulnov a long stare. Makar sat on the window-ledge, unbuttoning his sheepskin, turning his cap round in his hands, his lips moving soundlessly. Thus three minutes passed. Then Makar swiftly raised his head, and Razmiotnov met his open gaze.

"Come on, then," he said. "We've gone wrong. That's true enough. Davidov hit the nail on the head, the gap-toothed devil!" He smiled a little sheepishly.

As Davidov got into the sledge Kondrat Maidannikov stood talking to him, waving his arms as he fiercely told

his story. The driver impatiently gathered up the reins and adjusted the knout thrust under the seat. Davidov listened, biting his lips. As Razmiotnov went down the steps he heard him say:

"Don't get agitated! Don't take things so much to heart. Everything's in our hands, and we'll get it all straight. Fact! We'll introduce a system of punishments, and we'll make the brigade leaders personally responsible. Well, so long."

The knout spiralled and whistled over the horses' backs. The sledge marked the round, blue tracks of its runners across the snow, and disappeared through the gate.

Hundreds of hens were scattered like pebbles of a myriad hues in the fowl-yard. Old Akim, carrying a switch, was on duty in the yard. The breeze played with his grey beard, and dried the beads of sweat on his forehead. The "hen-feeler" walked about the yard, thrusting the hens out of his way with his felt boots. Over his shoulder hung a sack half-full of coarse grain, which he poured out in a narrow trail from the granary to the shed. Under his feet the chickens seethed like boiling soup, incessantly uttering their hurriedly anxious cries.

In the threshing floor, railed off by a palisade from the rest of the yard, the flock of geese showed white like solid heaps of chalk. From them came a full-throated, sonorous cackle, the flapping of wings, and hissing as though the threshing floor were the flooded fields during the spring migration.

A large crowd of men was gathered by the shed. From outside, there showed only a ring of backs and bottoms. All their heads were bent downward, their eyes were fixed on something at their feet in the centre of the ring.

Razmiotnov approached them and glanced across their

backs, attempting to discover what was happening in the ring. The men breathed heavily, and talked to one another in undertones.

"The red will win."

"The hell it won't! Look, its comb is already hanging crooked."

"Did you see that whack it gave the other?"

"Its mouth's wide open, it's tired out."

Then old Shchukar's voice sounded above the others:

"Don't keep poking him. He'll begin of his own accord. Don't poke him, you idiot. I'll give you a poke under the windpipe."

In the ring two cocks were strutting with outspread wings; one was a bright red, the other was feathered with bluish-black, raven plumage. Their combs were torn with pecks and black with clotted blood, their feet trod over black and red feathers. The two fighters were tired. They separated and made a pretence of pecking at something, scratched at the half-melted snow with their claws, eyeing each other with cautious glances. Their feigned indifference did not last long. The black cock suddenly sprang off the ground, flying up like a spark from a flame; the red cock also sprang up. Again and again they clashed in mid-air.

Completely oblivious of the world, old Shchukar watched them. A bead of chilly water trembled on the tip of his nose, but he did not notice it. All his attention was concentrated on the red cock. The red simply must win, for Shchukar had taken on a bet with Diemid the Silent. His tense concentration was abruptly disturbed by someone's hand: it dragged the old man roughly by the collar of his sheepskin jacket, and hauled him out of the circle. His face distorted with anger, Shchukar turned round, and with all a cock's determination he

threw himself on the offender. But his expression suddenly changed and became affable and welcoming: the hand was Nagulnov's. With a frown on his face, Makar dispersed the audience, separated the cocks, and morosely said:

"Setting cocks at each other, are you? Get off to your work, you drones. Go and carry hay to the stables if you haven't anything else to do. Or carry dung out to the gardens. Two of you go round the huts and tell the women to come and collect their chickens."

"So you're breaking up the collective fowl farm?" asked one of the watchers of the cock-fight, a man who had decided to remain an individual farmer. "It's clear their class-consciousness isn't strong enough for a collective farm. But tell me, will the cocks go on fighting under socialism or won't they?"

His face paling, Nagulnov measured the questioner with a heavy stare.

"You're being funny, but do you know what you're joking about?" he asked. "The finest flowers of the human race have perished for socialism, and who are you to joke about it, you dog's muck? Clear out, counter-revolutionary, or I'll give you one that'll send you flying out of this world. Clear off, reptile, before I turn you into a corpse. You see, I can be funny, too!"

He walked away from the abashed cossacks, took a last look at the yard and its swarming fowls, and slowly, with bowed shoulders, suppressing a deep sigh, went towards the gate.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A DISTRICT BUREAUCRAT

THE District Committee room was blue with tobacco smoke, a typewriter clattered, the Dutch stove breathed out its warmth. The committee was due to meet at two o'clock. The secretary of the District Committee, clean-shaven, sweating, with the collar of his cloth shirt unbuttoned owing to the heat of the room, was in a hurry. Pointing Davidov into a chair, he scratched his bare, puffy white neck, and said:

"I haven't got much time, get that clear. Well, how are things going? What is the percentage of collectivisation? Will you soon reach the hundred? Speak briefly."

"We shall soon," Davidov replied. "But it's not a question of percentages, but of what's going to happen inside the farm. I've brought the plan for the spring field work; would you like to see it?"

"No, no!" The secretary took alarm, and, painfully screwing up his baggy eyes, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. "Take it to Lupetov in the District Agricultural Union. He'll look at it and confirm it; I haven't got time. A comrade has arrived from the Regional Committee, and there's to be a meeting of the Bureau in a few minutes. But we've got to ask what the devil you sent the kulaks to us for? You're in for it now! Didn't I tell you in good Russian and